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Tattooing Among American Sailors and Maritime Communities from 1860 to 1945

Scott Boersma

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It is the 1880s in Brighton, England, on the coast of the English Channel. A young boy depicts a scene of some of the men who work at sea. "Nearly all my sailor friends on the beach were tattooed. Of course, their tattoos were crude: just an anchor, a primitive attempt at a portrait of Lord Nelson or a declaration of 'True Love' made by some other Jack Tar ''teween the heaving decks of a sailing-ship'. But a few had fine tattoos, made by Japanese horis or Burmese craftsmen when their ships had docked at Rangoon or Akyab or Yokohama".[1] That young boy, George Burchett, would later practice the trade of tattooing, join the Royal Navy, and become a leading figure in England's tattoo industry in the first half of the twentieth century. This example of tattooing within a British maritime community can help shed light on the practice among American sailors and maritime communities within the United States from 1860 to 1945.

As the United States of America grew and expanded, so did its maritime presence through commerce and military activities. This expansion led to changes and expansions in other maritime-related activities as well, tattooing being one of them. The practice would be localized by the establishment of permanent tattooing parlors in ports and expanded as increasing numbers of sailors looked for a souvenir of their maritime adventures. While the work of tattooists was heavily influenced by the nature and milestones of the profession, it expanded as the world became increasingly interconnected through maritime commerce. The United States would become a melting pot for European cultures and unique personas reflecting maritime experiences during this time period. A unique American maritime culture was born through this movement. The tattooing of American sailors and in maritime communities from 1860 to 1945 reflects a

[1] George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, eds. Peter Leighton (Crown Publishers, 1958), 37.

unique culture that was being established and, a desire for a sense of identity in a rapidly changing world as well as within the hierarchical maritime society.

1860: Humble Beginnings in a Mobile Industry

Americans, whether sailors, those in land-based maritime trades, or living in ports were not the first to experiment with leaving permanent marks upon the skin. The practice of marking the skin in a permanent matter dates back thousands of years ago.[2] The practice fell in and out of style, but in the modern era the practice was becoming more prevalent in western civilization by 1860. This was due to European and American exploration of the Pacific in the 1700s, as in the Pacific marking or tattooing was prevalent among certain island tribes.[3] This practice and marking of the skin would make its way back to European shores on the bodies of sailors. This study of tattooing among American sailors and in maritime communities begins in 1860 for several reasons. The main reason behind this date was the soon to be growth and expansion of the United States maritime presence. The second reason was the establishment of some of the first permanent tattoo parlors in the United States, an important factor in the expansion and continuity in tattooing. The third reason was European immigration to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, that would lead to a mixing of cultures in the United States. These three factors often

[2] "Facts about tattoos." Royal Museums Greenwich. National Maritime Museum. Accessed November 17, 2018. https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/facts-about-tattoos. When Özti the iceman, a 5,000-year-old bronze-age man was discovered in a European glacier in 1991, his skin tissue so well preserved that researchers were able to identify multiple tattoos.

[3] Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 14. Sanders makes a point to mention modern European tattooing begins with the Cook expedition in the Pacific and the island of Tahiti.

intertwined and supported the expansion of tattooing among American sailors and maritime communities.

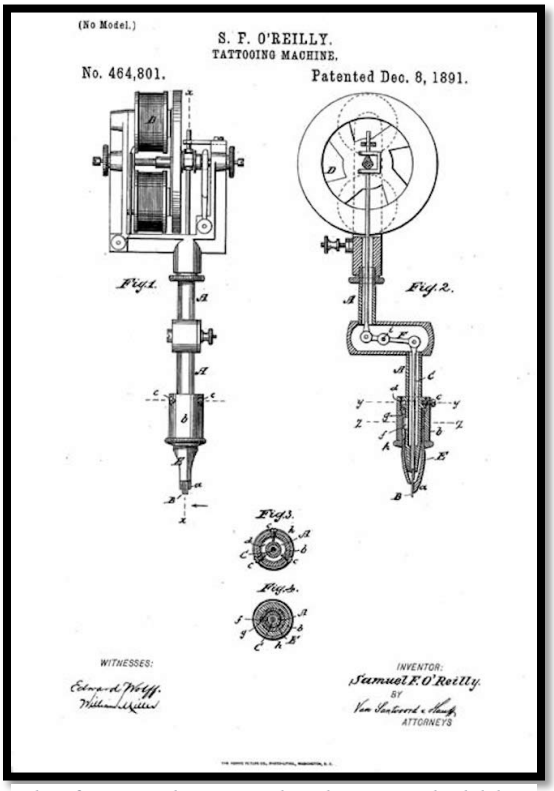
With the outbreak of the Civil War the eighteen sixties were a tumultuous period in American history. Through this war, the United States federal government along with the navy would devise a plan to blockade the seceding states, attempting to blockade a 3,500 mile stretch of the American coast. Once the plan to blockade the Confederate states was made, the federal navy began building up its fleet.[4] The mobilization of men by both sides of the conflict would bring entrepreneurs into their ranks in hopes of permanently marking these men. The earliest recorded professional tattoo artist in America was Martin Hildebrandt. Hildebrandt claimed to have opened the first shop in 1846, but it is known that he was operating a tattoo business in New York City by 1877.[5] Martin Hildebrandt reportedly tattooed thousands of sailors and soldiers, learning his trade from an engraver whom he served with on board the USS *United States* during the Mexican War.[6] While the testimony of one tattoo artist has questionable validity, there is primary evidence to support that American maritime members were tattooed in the period from the creation of the United States navy to and including the Civil War. Seamen's protection certificates and navy enlistment returns issued starting in the 1790s noted when sailors had tattoos or other distinguishing body marks. Examination of seamen protection certificates by Ira Dye led him to conclude he that "seafarer tattooing appears to have been fixed and stylized from its initial

[4] "The Rise of the American Navy 1775-1914." *History Net*. World History Group. Accessed November 18,2018. http://www.historynet.com/the-rise-of-the-american-navy-1775-1914.htm. Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles started the war with 12 warships, 17 steam warships, and only 2 operational steam sloops. In 1861 he would purchase 176 ships and contract another 49 to be built.

[5] "Tattooing as a Fine Art" *Chicago Daily Tribune,* October 28, 1877. By 1877, Hildebrandt is operating a shop in New York City when a reporter from the *New York Sun* visit his shop to learn about the trade.

[6] "Tattooing as a Fine Art" *Chicago Daily Tribune,* October 28, 1877.

appearance in these records, indicating that the custom was well established" by the end of the nineteenth century.[7] The practice during the Civil War can be followed using navy enlistment returns. One such document from 1863 highlights Irish immigrants enlisting into the navy having their tattoos documented as part of official record keeping.[8] These records support the fact that the practice of tattooing was prevalent among American sailors before 1860. While it is not known the exact reasoning behind individual's decisions to permanently mark themselves, a tattoo leading to a source of identification whether in life or death could be a leading cause in an age where lack of identification could see your remains put in an unnamed mass grave.[9]


(No Model.)

S. F. O'REILLY.

TATTOOING MACHINE.

No. 464,801. Patented Dec. 8, 1891.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Figs. 3.

Figs. 4.

WITNESSES:

INVENTOR:
Samuel F. O'Reilly.
BY
ATTORNEYS

The figure above is the drawing held by the US Patent Office for Samuel O'Reilly's electric tattooing machine

Tattooing at this period was still a highly mobile practice among sailors and the arrival of permanent tattoo parlors would soon take hold within the coming decades in ports. Martin Hildebrandt's claim to fame is that he established the first permanent tattoo parlor in the United States, yet there were other individuals setting up shop in New York City. These artists would

[7] Ira Dye. "The Tattoos of Early American Seafarers, 1796-1818" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 133, No. 4 (Dec. 1989), p.528

[8] Damian Shiels. "Inked Irishmen: Irish Tattoos in 1860s New York," *Irish American Civil War*, Damian Shiels, May 23, 2018, https://irishamericancivilwar.com/2018/05/23/inked-irishmen-irish-tattoos-in-1860s-new-york/

[9] Aida Amer and Sarah Laskow. "Tattooing in the Civil War was a Hedge Against Anonymous Death." *Atlas Obscura*. Atlas Obscura. Accessed December 5, 2018. https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/civil-war-tattoos

transform the practice, from using crude tools in 1877, described as "a queer little instrument made by binding six No.12 needles to the end of a stick as large as a pen-holder and half as long." to using electric tattoo machines.[10] Samuel F. O'Reilly would design the device around 1890 which would quicken the process and decrease the pain involved, also allowing for greater detail in coloration and shading.[11] This technological advance would give greater depth to the designs being applied and the number of tattoos an artist could administer. While the designs were not so crude, they still emblemized the trade of being a seafarer. These designs included but were not limited to anchors, crosses, crucifixion scenes, sailors, women, an eagle, coat-of-arms, and national flags, all early designs that were common among sailors.[12] While these examples give an idea of what designs were being tattooed on sailors' bodies, it is not totally encompassing. Yet the underlying importance of identity and tattoos is clear; these tattoos were "conveying experiences for those around to read, even without a verbal exchange taking place"[13] As time progressed this would still hold true for American sailors and in maritime communities.

1900: The Rise of Tattooing and the Expansion of the Navy

The years around 1900 mark an important middle ground in this examination of tattooing among American sailors and in maritime communities. By nineteen hundred there were considerable advances in tattooing and in the United States global maritime presence. As for tattooing, these advances would lead to innovative tattooing devices, more tattoo artists,

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[10] "Tattooing as a Fine Art" *Chicago Daily Tribune,* October 28, 1877.

[11] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, eds. by Jane Caplan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 215

[12] "Tattooing as a Fine Art" *Chicago Daily Tribune,* October 28, 1877

[13] Louise, Moon. "Tattoos, Tars and Sailortown Culture." *Port Towns and Urban Cultures.* University of Portsmouth. Accessed November 30, 2018. http://porttowns.port.ac.uk/tattoos-tars-sailortown-culture/

permanent parlors, and a distinct culture of tattooing in the United States. As for the United States maritime presence, the rising nation would look towards a navy to show the world its equal stature, leading to the establishment of military epicenters and a distinct nationalized maritime culture within the United States. Tattooing among American sailors and in maritime communities continue to intermingle at this period as sailors continue to tattoo and parlors are established in American maritime communities such as Chicago, New York City, Norfolk, and San Diego.

Francis B. Johnston. USS Olympia (Cruiser #6) tattooing, 1899. Library of Congress photo #LC-J698-61327_Lot 8688. Men Aboard the USS Olympia look on as the tattooing process is put in practice aboard their ship.

Nineteen hundred also proved to be a middle ground for the expansion and strength in the United States foreign policy. In 1898, the United States challenged Spain over control in the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean, leading to United States control over Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines. Swift victories over Spanish fleets would give the United States a perspective that it had not experienced before, becoming a rising and formidable naval power on the global stage.[14] A rise of national pride among sailors flourished and mixed with other factors, led to sailors tattooing and getting tattooed to commemorate the victories and experiences. On a ship stationed in

[14] "The Rise of the American Navy 1775-1914." *History Net*. World History Group. Accessed November 18,2018. http://www.historynet.com/the-rise-of-the-american-navy-1775-1914.htm. "At the beginning of Roosevelt's first term, the United States ranked among the top five naval powers of the pre-dreadnought era."

Manilla Bay in 1899, men aboard the USS *Olympia* were noted by a fellow sailor as having tattoos commemorating their victory. Surviving artwork of tattoo designs that corresponds with described accounts as well as photographic evidence of the practice aboard the ship, allows one to infer that the practice was not limited in its scope.[15] A 1898 *Chicago Daily Tribune* news article notes one such instance of tattooing at Camp Meade in Pennsylvania in which a retired sailor found success in traveling to military installations, tattooing eager and bored servicemen.[16] As President Roosevelt expanded the navy and used it to show the United States naval power through the Great White Fleet expedition (1907-1909), the United States would establish far-flung military epicenters to continue this legacy and expand America's maritime power.

A handful of bases were becoming beacons for tattoo artists to establish permanent residences to fill the growing demand by service members. The navy established the Great Lakes Naval Station in Illinois in 1911, the Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia in 1917, and the San Diego Naval Base in 1922. Naval dockyards such as San Francisco's Hunters Point Naval Shipyard and New York City's Brooklyn Navy Yard employed thousands of maritime workers. Each of these cities had their own unique maritime culture from years past which would mix with national identities being forged by the navy's expansion. Tattoos were used as mechanisms for social communication within the complex maritime communities which these men spent most of their time.[17] Tattoo artists would capitalize on this culture that they often had previous experience with to demarcate the maritime experiences of individuals who entered their shop. By the early 1900s, Samuel O'Reilly in New York City was training numerous artists to continue the

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[15] Hope Corse and others, *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor* (Philadelphia: Independence Seaport Museum, 2009), 45.

[16] "Former Sailor Tattoos the Soldiers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 20, 1898.

[17] Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* , 20-21.

trade and made modifications to his patented electric tattoo machine. As tattooing became faster and easier to perform with technological advancements such as the electric tattoo machine, more artists were able to learn the trade and more tattoos were able to be administered to willing clientele.

While the expansion of tattooing was popular among soldiers, sailors, and those within maritime communities, the practice did not go unnoticed by the public. An article in 1902 from the *New-York Tribune* holds an interview with a local tattoo artist, "Professor" Elmer Gitchell. This article is one of many that sheds light on the growing presence of tattoos within American culture as well as pushback the practice received. American society at this time was worried about the tattooing of children and hastily made decisions by individuals, yet even in 1902, some tattooists viewed their trade as an art.[18] George Burchett would contend that Sutherland Macdonald would coin the word tattooist or tattoo artist rather than tattooer, stating "…that an artist is a tattoo-ist and only dabblers and low alley-fellows should be described as tattoo-ers".[19] Another article dated from 1902 makes the argument of tattooing among young sailors entering the Navy was decreasing while their officers were adorned with them.[20] While the validity of this article is questionable, it underlines a greater issue that "The relationship between the popular press and the actual demographics of tattooing in America is unclear."[21] This can lead to a skewed understanding of the actual growth or decline of the practice among sailors and around

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[18] "A Tattooing 'Artist'." *New-York Tribune*, October 26, 1902.

[19] George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 106.

[20] "Tattoo Work Decreasing." *The Pacific commercial advertiser*, November 19, 1902.

[21] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 213.

the nation. Due to the increased presence of tattooing in the 1940s, an argument can be made that prior to World War II there may have been a decline in tattooing due to a relatively reduced naval forces and the fact that sailors likely could not afford tattoos during the Great Depression.[22] If there was a decrease, the practice was not entirely put to rest among sailors and in maritime communities.

Comparatively, the tattooing industry was on the rise in Victorian England and sought by almost all classes, soldier, sailor, aristocrat, and royalty alike. An artist much like Samuel O'Reilly in New York City, Sutherland Macdonald was operating in London by 1889.[23] The most common tattoo consumers were sailors, craftsmen, military and members of the aristocracy. Tattooing of royalty gained the attention of the press, especially. Notable members being Czar Nicholas II of Russia, King George of Greece, King Oscar of Sweden, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, and most male members of the British royal family.[24] King George V would be tattooed in 1882 by one of the first famous Japanese artists, Hori Chyo aboard the H.M.S *Bacchante* and King Fredrick of Denmark would be tattooed by the famous British artist, George Burchett. While it is difficult to know if the tattooing practice was thriving among American sailors and maritime communities, it is known that tattooists such as Sutherland Macdonald served both aristocrats and sailors under the same roof, creating an unknown social connection through the tattoo artist.

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[22] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 219.

[23] Jessica Stewart, "Sutherland MacDonald Tattoo History," *My Modern Met*, My Modern Metropolis, LLC, May 29, 2017, https://mymodernmet.com/sutherland-macdonald-tattoo-history/

[24] Clinton Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* , 15.

1945: The Marked Generation

Nineteen forty-five marks the end of a period of unprecedented and historic growth in the United States military and industry due to the Second World War. This growth led to an increased number of individuals gaining first-hand experiences on the sea and in maritime communities. In nineteen thirty-nine, United States military personnel numbered 334,473 and by nineteen forty-five, military personnel numbered at 12,209,238.[25] In the same period the United States Navy active ship force would expand from 394 ships in 1939 to a staggering 6,768 in 1945. Through the Second World War, the United States would effectively send ships around the globe, crossing the Atlantic and Mediterranean to defeat Nazism in Europe and crossing the Pacific to combat Japanese imperial expansion.

During this period, tattooists were enjoying a wartime boom and with military members from all branches across the United States crowding into tattoo parlors to get their skin marked, tattoos spread like wildfire. Patriotic tattoos reminiscent of a generation before which would have read "Remember the Maine" now read "Remember Pearl Harbor". Due to the increased presence of servicemen in and around maritime communities, artistic designs were created to reflect the changes such as "Happy Landings" for airmen and "chutes and boots" for paratroopers. While most of these men were not life-long sailors, the same principle of identity applied, as tattoos were a means of establishing bonds and group solidarity among platoons, divisions, and branches of government.[26] Other popular designs used were to express devotion to

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[25] "Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers," *National WWII Museum*, National WWII Museum, Accessed December 7, 2018, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers

[26] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 226.

family, girls back home, or country. Even if men missed their opportunity to get their skin scratched by a tattoo artist in the ports of the United States, tattooists would be waiting for them in England. Tattooist, George Burchett understood what a war meant when it came to Europe in nineteen thirty-nine. "I prepared for action. Unlike the folk who feared annihilation from a sky darkened with black bombers, I knew exactly what to expect. There would be queues, and one of the biggest would line up outside my surgery."[27] Burchett's account of tattooing Americans reinforces the idea of commemorating experiences, stating, "they are great tourists, even in the middle of a war, and I had many more orders for the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, London Bridge, Big Ben, Nelson's Column and any amount of Eros statues from Piccadilly Circus."[28] Overall, the acceptance of tattooing was widespread among servicemen at this time which has not been seen on the same scale since the Second World War. This acceptance and social approval of tattooing can be attributed the link to patriotism and nationalistic fervor within the United States.[29]

As the war came to an end, the wartime boom for tattooists was over. Millions of Americans would be discharged by the military and return home with permanent souvenirs. Resocialization into civilian life proved difficult for some military men, as their tattoos which once been an important symbol of status in the military had negative social value and associations at home.[30] Changes in American society such as Americans rushing to marry, have

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[27] George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 123.

[28] George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 125.

[29] Margo DeMello, *Inked: Tattoos and Body Art Around the World*, Vol. 2 (ABC-CLIO, 2014), 413.

[30] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 229.

families, settle into suburban areas away from cities and an emphasis on conformality and comfort would help drive this negative association in the United States.[31] These changes went against many of the rebellious stereotypes associated with tattooing likely due to its maritime heritage and societal connection. The practice would decline due to these societal changes, but tattooists would adjust to the changes in the demand as they had done before. A key to success for many tattooists in this period was staying close to military installations and maritime communities. One tattooist would build his reputation near one such military installation in Hawaii. Norman Collins would keep his practice going, heavily influencing the modern tattoo industry with his designs inspired by maritime experiences. Another tattooist, Milton Zeis would set up shop in Rock Island, IL, helping spread tattooing by manufacturing tattoo machines and training artists through the mail. Both men would tattoo into the 1970s in the United States, their designs and styles which were heavily influenced by maritime experiences. These designs were passed down to their apprentices that can be seen in a "classic" tattoo revival today. Although most Americans have a disconnect from the ocean, these tattoos provide a different sense of identity, the designs of a by-gone era are still being permanently marked on the skin of individuals today.

[31] Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, 230.

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